

GAMES

PREVIEW

Stream My Game

This exciting new software lets you stream games across your local network, or even the internet, just as you can media files. It enables you to play games on a laptop that isn't powerful enough to run them, for example, or on a quiet media-centre PC in the living room. You can even keep an eye on an online RPG from your desk at work.

You simply install the software on the two computers you wish to use, and register the service online. You can then stream DirectX games from one PC to the other.

It works by taking the video output from the game engine and compressing it into a video file using MPEG4. This is then streamed with the compressed audio to the second PC, which needs only to be able to play the video file. Keyboard and mouse commands travel in the opposite direction to control the game.

After some tinkering we got a game of Call of Duty 2 running over our labs network. The freeware version of the software limits you to a resolution of 640x480, so the game looked a little rough round the edges. There's also a tiny delay in responding to your inputs, so while games are playable, you couldn't compete properly in an online deathmatch. We'll review the full version of the software more thoroughly next month.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

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ELECTRONIC ARTS

Crysis

★★★★★

£27 inc VAT

From www.play.com

The long-awaited sequel to Far Cry is finally here. It's the first DirectX 10 game to emerge, and it looks better than anything else we've seen. You assume the role of US Delta Force operator Jake Dunn, and your job is to battle the North Korean army as well as the aliens, which have invaded Earth.

You wear a nano suit and have various futuristic weapons at your disposal. The suit has four functions, the default of which is armour to help you get through the main fights. Click the middle mouse button and a circular menu appears with the other choices: power, speed and cloaking. Power allows you to jump to otherwise out-of-reach places and kill foes with your bare hands. Speed is handy for making a quick exit and cloak lets you move around undetected. A fifth option enables you to customise your weapons by attaching silencers, flash lights, laser sights and more.

The first four settings use the suit's energy reserves, forcing you to adapt your technique in each situation. The wide-open design means you can play levels in different ways. If you want to jump in a boat and drive straight over a lake to reach your target, you can, but you can also sneak around the perimeter using stealth.

The AI is surprisingly good – enemies don't bunch up when they spot you, but will work as a team with boat and air support. If they spot you cloaking, they'll fire at your last position and then go into surveillance mode to look for you.

At very high quality settings, textures look almost photo-realistic, and water looks even better than it did in Far Cry. The



▲ Crysis looks fantastic and the gameplay doesn't disappoint either. You'll need a fast PC to enjoy its full glory, though

attention to detail is breathtaking, and the little touches are everywhere. Water droplets streak off your mask when you emerge from water, and frost forms on your gun barrel in the snow levels. While Far Cry was almost entirely jungle-based, Crysis includes treats such as the inside of an alien ship with zero-gravity.

Two multiplayer modes are available: deathmatch and a team-based mode called Power Struggle. It's complicated, but worth the steep learning curve. Each team has to capture buildings to acquire weapons and vehicles, as well as developing nuclear weapons to blast your enemies' bases.

However, to play Crysis at the highest detail settings you'll need a very powerful Windows Vista PC. We tested it with a quad-core processor, 3GB RAM and a GeForce 8800 Ultra with 768MB RAM. Even this setup struggled to reach 30fps at 1,440x900. It's possible to make Crysis look almost as good under XP by downloading a file from www.crysis-online.com/?id=449, but don't be surprised if you have to lower the resolution and quality settings more than usual to get a playable frame rate.

Jim Martin

SUMMARY

- ✓ Beautiful graphics
- ✓ Great gameplay
- ✗ Requires top-end PC

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 3.2GHz processor, 1.5GB RAM, 12GB hard disk space, 256MB DirectX 9.0c graphics card **DETAILS** www.ea.com/crysis

Top 5 games

1. BioShock

£25 inc VAT ★★★★★



BioShock successfully blends first-person shooting with RPG-style character upgrades. It's set in an undersea city that's both terrible and beautiful to behold.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.cultofrapture.com FULL REVIEW Dec 2007



2. Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar

£13 + £9 a month inc VAT ★★★★★



This online role-playing game lets you immerse yourself in Tolkien's Middle Earth. The game's detail is truly stunning, it's easy to get into and the combat is excellent.

SUPPLIER www.gameplay.co.uk DETAILS www.lotro.com FULL REVIEW Sep 2007



3. Colin McRae: DiRT

£22 inc VAT ★★★★★



This game is a double-whammy of remarkable graphics and intense physics. Never before has a road surface felt so real. It's an amazing leap forward for driving games.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.codemasters.com/dirt FULL REVIEW Sep 2007



4. Supreme Commander

£13 inc VAT ★★★★★



This RTS has the biggest battles ever seen on a PC. There's a vast range of units to command and the graphics are slick, but you'll need a powerful PC to run it smoothly.

SUPPLIER www.powerplaydirect.com DETAILS www.supremecommander.com FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



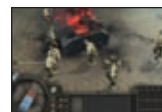
5. Company of Heroes (DX10)

£20 inc VAT ★★★★★



Bombed French towns look better than ever in this DX10 version of our 2007 Best Game award winner. But it's the innovative gameplay that makes this the top RTS.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.thq.com FULL REVIEW Jan 2007





▲ Catch up on the Half-Life 2 story so far and get two great bonus games into the bargain

VALVE The Orange Box

★★★★★

£27 inc VAT
From www.game.co.uk



Not content with creating gaming masterpieces at every turn, Valve's newest release, The Orange Box, is enough to set most gamers dribbling with anticipation. Rather than a new game, The Orange Box is a collection of Valve's latest releases – a Half-Life omnibus, if you will. For the very reasonable price of £27 you get the original Half-Life 2 bundled with its sequel, Episode 1, and the latest instalment in the Half-Life story, Episode 2. In addition there's the recent first-person puzzler Portal, and the team-based online shooter Team Fortress 2.

If you've never played Half-Life 2 or either of its superb sequels, you're in for a treat. You see through the eyes of Gordon Freeman, a scientist-turned-freedom fighter. Disturbed by visions of a dystopian future, you wake up on a train trundling into the oppressive regime of City 17. It's not clear where you've been since the events of the original Half-Life game, but something has gone disastrously wrong and you're the one-man army to sort it all out.

In the hands of a lesser developer, the Half-Life series might have become dull and derivative, but the magic Valve touch is still evident. Few games can boast even one truly jaw-dropping set piece, but Half-Life 2 and its sequels string one revelatory moment after another. Everything is perfect – the soundtrack is a treat for the ears and, while the graphics may pale in comparison with those of Crysis or BioShock, few games come so close to creating a living, breathing reality.

We could easily have forgiven Valve if the other two games, Portal and Team Fortress 2, hadn't been much good, but they're great games in their own right. Portal's darkly humorous tone sets the perfect mood for a brain-teasing puzzler, and Team Fortress 2 is simply one of the best, if not *the* best, online team-based shooters we've ever played. For just £27, The Orange Box will make for a very happy Christmas indeed.

Sasha Muller

SUMMARY

- ✓ Five great games for the price of one
- ✓ Hours of superb gameplay
- ✓ Runs well even on modest PCs

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1.7GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 5GB disk space
PART CODE B000PS2XES
DETAILS <http://orange.half-life2.com>



▲ As well as playing the predictable US Marine role, you also get to take part in SAS operations

THQ Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

★★★★★

£30 inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk



Ditching its original World War II setting for the war on terror might seem like a faddish misfire, but Call of Duty 4 is more 24 than Gulf War.

An impressively cinematic narrative adds purpose to the fighting, and is packed with outrageous twists and stunning set pieces. You'll find yourself in an interactive flashback mission in Chernobyl, caught up in a national revolution, racing to prevent nuclear war and other scenarios that we won't spoil for you.

The single-player game is absolutely linear, but it has so much panache and momentum that you'll rarely notice your lack of choices. There are a few drab moments, but CoD4 changes the surroundings and your challenges often. You'll never feel that you're going down yet another identical corridor full of identical men. It's fairly short, though – it won't last much more than a weekend – but there's no dead weight here, just tightly focused fun.

Once you have finished the campaign, the multiplayer mode steps ably in. It's heavier on stealth than many of its rivals, and excels at encouraging team play. The more you win, the more weapons and abilities you unlock. The idea isn't novel, but the implementation is: you customise your character with your preferred perks, rather than those dictated by the game. So you might choose an ability that lets you listen in on enemy chatter for one game, and then swap for greater bullet penetration in the next. Chasing the unlocks gives you a reason to play, and makes you feel as if you're doing your own thing rather than just following the game's rules.

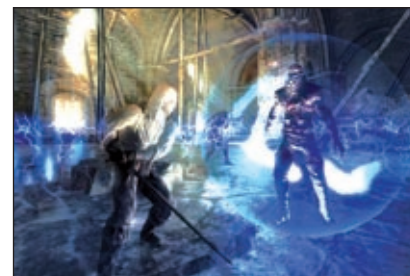
It's very much a traditional shooter with some modern clothing, but there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. There might not be a lot of brain work or experimentation here, but it's an expertly realised rollercoaster ride.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Incredible production values
- ✓ Multiplayer with a purpose
- ✗ Familiar formula beneath all the polish

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.4GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 8GB disk space
PART CODE B000RE4Y70
DETAILS www.charlieoscardelta.com



▲ In each fight, you must work out which of your swords and stances will kill your foe

ATARI The Witcher

★★★

£25 inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk

Deep, story-led role-playing games are rare these days. Perhaps that's why The Witcher has been hailed as game of the year in some quarters. Sadly, it isn't. Poor translation from its original Polish, an experimental but irritating combat system and a strong vein of sexism hold it back from greatness.

There isn't much like this around at the moment, though, and it's great to see someone having a thoughtful stab at it. While other games of a similar type resort to mindless hack and slash, The Witcher focuses on telling a tale, subverting Tolkien stereotypes and offering up moral choices. Based on a renowned series of Polish novels, the game casts you as mutated monster hunter Geralt. He's recovering from a bout of amnesia, and has lost most of the incredible skills he demonstrated in the 20-minute cutscene at the start of the game. To save the world, he must fight a lot of monsters and complete various quests, both mandatory and optional, until he's strong enough to tackle the really bad guys.

The tale has a few neat twists, but it's told unconvincingly. None of the voice actors seems to have had any direction, and they speak as if they're having entirely separate conversations, giving the acting a B-movie feel.

You have a fairly impressive degree of choice along the journey. There are plenty of non-compulsory fights, quests and women to bed in a nasty, but mercifully optional, minigame that rewards you with a smutty collector's card for every successful seduction.

The combat is a love-it or hate-it affair that involves clicking the mouse in time to onscreen prompts, rather than real-time action or turn-based strategy. It's certainly novel, but it can feel vague and clumsy. This rings true for The Witcher all over. Its attempts at ingenuity and complexity are admirable, but they are never quite refined enough to make this game the triumph it might have been.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Complex and meaty role-playing
- ✓ Good-looking, with plenty to do
- ✗ Distractingly bad dialogue

ROLE-PLAYING GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.4GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 8GB disk space
PART CODE B000PIVX4E
DETAILS www.thewitcher.com